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# THE COMPANION

ENGLISH MONTHLY



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**Editor :** Mujahidul Islam  
editor@thecompanion.in

**Assistant Editor :** Farukh Shaikh

**Manager :** Shahid Khan  
(08447510540 /managerrmgp@sio-india.org)

**Asst.Manager :** Rahemat Hussain  
(09560267873)

**PR Manager :** S. Mushtaq

**Book Design & Cover :** Shan Ahamed

D-300 (Old 230) Abul Fazal Enclave, Jamia Nagar  
Okhla New Delhi-25

Tel: 011-26949817. Fax 26946285

Mobile: +91-9873790897,

Email: editorcompanion@gmail.com,  
manager@rafeeqemanzil.com,

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# Muslims have become New Subalterns

- INTERVIEW WITH JNU **PROF. AJAY GUDAVARTHY**  
BY MISHAB IRIKKUR & ABHAY KUMAR



*Ajay Gudavorthy is an Assistant Professor at Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Apart from his deep interest in theory, particularly critical school, post-marxism and postcolonial studies, he also keeps an eye on political processes and dynamism of Indian politics. As the fire of communal violence is fast engulfing many parts of the country and the ruling BJP, as alleged by the opposition parties, remains involved in polarising society for electoral gains, Mishab Irikkur and Abhay Kumar spent some time with Ajay Gudavorthy, conversing with him about the current volatile situation. In a free-wheeling discussion, Gudavorthy contended that the saffronization of subalterns, Dalits and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), is one of the main causes of the spurt of anti-Muslim violence. According to him, Muslims have become so vulnerable that any individual or a social group can easily attack them. This marginalisation of Muslims, according to him, is seen in all three spheres--social, economic and political. The following is the excerpt of the conversation.*

***How do you view the spurt of incidents of anti-Muslim violence across the country including persistence of communal tension in western UP?***

India had a long tradition of communal violence but the recent incidents of anti-Muslim attacks in UP are a unique phenomenon. The uniqueness lies in the nature of conflicts, which are of low intensity with persistence of communal tensions, mostly fought between Dalits and Muslims and OBCs and Muslims. This is happening because the RSS and the BJP have been gradually succeeding in saffronising Dalits and OBCs. Today a large chunk of subalterns are in the fold of the RSS and the BJP, which chased in on internal contradictions

among lower castes. As a large section of lower castes are also oppressed by their dominant sub-castes, who are perceived to have cornered most of the opportunities in jobs, resources and politics, the most marginalised sections of Dalits and OBCs view the RSS and the BJP as providing an opportunity for social mobility. This aspect of lower caste politics was not understood by any party other than the Hindu right. It is this saffronised Dalits and OBCs, who are primarily executing RSS's anti-Muslim agenda. I have recently been in Telangana on a fieldwork where I have noticed that OBCs in a large chunk are shifting to the BJP, which, in turn, supported the Telangana Movement. If this trend continues, the whole sections of OBCs will shift to the BJP in coming 10 years all across the country. Such trends are very dangerous as witnessed in Muzaffarnagar where OBCs have overwhelmingly supported the BJP.

***How have the RSS and the BJP succeeded in saffronising Dalits and OBCs, who are the real victims of the Hindu social order?***

Over the decades Indian politics has witnessed a gradual rightward shift of the lower castes. Why has this happened? I will offer a sociological explanation of this, which I call the phenomenon of entrenched caste psyche. While the fact remains that the caste, like a ladderlike structure, maintains a system of graded-inequality as every group has a dual-positionality with an oppressor above and the oppressed below, the anti-caste movements of India have exclusively addressed the dominance of the upper castes but never as much simultaneously articulated the caste hegemony towards those below by the very same sub-group/sub-caste. For example, Dalits and OBCs do mistreat, humiliate and exploit those castes, which are placed below them. But this intra-group domination has not been on the agenda of anti-caste movements. Instead, these movements are operating with big categories like Brahmins and non-Brahmins, upper caste, OBCs, Dalits etc. What I want to underscore is that the caste psyche, to dominate those below you, remains unquestioned by anti-caste movements. This very caste psyche has pitted Dalits and OBCs against Muslims, whom I consider as the most vulnerable sections and universal target of society. Unfortunately, Left and progressive sections have remained oblivious of this dimension as they, instead of engaging with subaltern politics critically, have celebrated everything about them. The so-much celebrated Subaltern Studies, for example, have pat-

ronised the marginalised sections.

***What do you have to say about the progressive aspect of lower caste assertion? Are you not undermining this?***

I have never said that there is no progressive aspect of lower caste politics. I do consider its assertion as a part of process of democratisation. But there is also a failure of anti-caste movements. Long back Ambedkar underscored an urgent need for annihilation of caste but that agenda has been now dismissed as a utopia. The next phase was secularisation of caste, whose apologists strongly argued that the lower castes' assertion is a secular upsurge as marginalised castes across religions became united in their struggle for social justice. But after its initial success, it soon gushed out as the RSS and the BJP were able to Hindutva-ize the Bahujan sections. As I mentioned earlier the success of the RSS and the BJP lies in the unwillingness to anti-caste movements to raise the issue of intra-group domination. Who are the beneficiaries of reservations? Who are dominating lower caste politics? For example, OBC politics is dominated by one of the two castes such as Yadavas and Kurmis in Bihar and Dalit politics by Malas in Andhra Pradesh, Mahars in Maharashtra and Chamars in UP. The other sub-castes among Dalits and OBCs are yet to be empowered. The intra-caste contradiction must be understood against this background. The OBC and Bahujan politics have not addressed this concern as it does not matter electorally. Do you think lower caste politics is serious about taking up the issue of snake charmer? Having perceived the possibility of an upward mobility through lower caste politics, the marginalised lot of lower castes is joining the RSS and the BJP. This gives them a sense of empowerment as they are now part of majority. Their attraction towards the RSS and the BJP is also because of the fact that the dominant sections of lower caste politics such as Dalits in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh have converted to Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. They, therefore, are taking a route to Hinduism. The RSS and the BJP, in turn, have welcomed them and projected them warriors of Hinduism so they are launching attacks on Muslims to prove their Hindu-ness.

***What do you think about the nature of recent communal violence in western UP?***

The BJP is operating with two strategies. I call it high intensity growth with low intensity communalism. Let me explain this. As Modi's Government at the Centre follows Gujarat model of neoliberal economic policy with a view to achieving high growth, it



cannot afford to go for high intensity episodic communal riots of the past. The BJP has realised that there is little acceptance for carnages like Gujarat violence 2002 among investors and middle classes. Moreover, the talk of governance by Modi does not sit well with big communal riots of the past. That is why the RSS and the BJP are not engineering a high intensity communal violence. Rather they are content with insidious elimination of Muslims. This everyday elimination of Muslims is done by depriving them of their economic opportunity and rendering them politically insignificant. Even Congress is in dilemma to give tickets to Muslims as it does not want to appear pro-Muslim and thus anti-Hindus. One can see how much communal consciousness has penetrated at the bottom of our society that when I asked a Dalit in Punjab if caste mattered to him in poll, his answer was that he would vote a “meritorious” candidate. But when I asked him if he would vote for a Muslim candidate, his prompt reply was that Muslim hamara aadmi nahin hain [Muslim is not from amongst us]. Thus Muslim has become a new outsider in India politics.

*Do you agree with the view that Modi has failed to fulfill his promises to ensure “development” for all after coming to power? According to his own Government’s statistics, 308 communal incidents have been reported in the country in the first six months of this year, of which 56 have taken place in Uttar Pradesh alone.*

Unlike the Congress-led UPA which had the principle of social justice and welfare of the people, despite the fact that it was not properly implemented during its 10 years of rule—the BJP rule, in contrast, follows low intensity communalism against Muslims. But one should keep in mind that the old Modi is gone and his dirty work is being executed by his right-hand and BJP president Amit Shah. While Manmohan, Chidambaram and Montek were the face of growth and Gandhi family that of social justice, Modi is now the mascot of good governance, keeping silence on communal issue while Amit Shah will do the opposite. These two contradictory things will operate simultaneously in Indian politics.

*Will you attribute the unprecedented victory of the BJP in the General Election, particularly in UP, to*

*its ability to incite and maintain a situation of communal tension?*

Apart from the saffronisation of lower castes, there are other reasons as well. Modi came to power riding on an anti-Congress wave. I will explain to you why I call it a positive move. This anti-Congress wave was founded on the solid grounds of demands for more welfare measures. It was a discontent against inflation and employment. Amid this condition of unrest, it is Modi who succeeded in pursuing masses that he could deliver. During the UPA rule we witnessed the facelessness of neoliberalism as nobody owned the responsibility for crisis, as a result of price rise, unemployment and agrarian stagnation. Even the UPA Government, instead of addressing the crisis, attributed them to foreign factors. Even the Gandhi family failed to take responsibility and provide relief to masses. In the wake of this, the RSS pinned their trust in Modi and embarked on a plan for mass mobilization. The RSS meticulously planned everything and did a detailed study of each constituency. Even there is a talk that the BJP spent 300 crore to field dummy Muslim candidates to divide Muslim votes. That is why the BJP was able to bag 300 seats with just 31 per cent vote share. Besides, the rise of Anna Hazare and the Aam Aadmi Party also contributed to the victory of Modi. I have been long arguing that anti-corruption movement of Anna Hazare and AAP, which is essentially a middle class movement, rhetorically talked of majoritarian language with no real agenda. In the 1970s the JP movement also did the same thing but they all have not heeded the fact that the source of corruption lies in many factors, such as structure of political economy, nepotism and caste network in bureaucracy and the nature of economic reforms of our country. There was a deep sense of cynicism among middle class and this brought them closer to Modi.

*Are you worried about the report of media that there is a possibility of the BJP to maintain communal tension for electoral gains in upcoming by-elections in western UP and state’s assembly election in 2017? In other words, what is the relationship between polls and communal polarisation?*

As I mentioned above the riots are engineered by the BJP for electoral gains and it is likely to pursue the same policy. But the most important aspect is why has the BJP been successful in its plan? Answer to this lies in the fact that it enjoys considerable acceptability not

only among its traditional voters like Brahmins and Banias but also among increasingly section of subalterns.

*There are the incidents of communal fissures between Dalits and Muslims (Azamgarh), Sikhs and Muslims (Sabaranpur) in UP. How do you look at this?*

The RSS fuels anti-Muslim feelings among Sikhs using the memory of Partition. As for Dalits versus Muslims conflicts I have dwelt on it earlier that it is due to entrenched caste psyche and rightward shift of lower caste politics. Today there is little incentive to be secular. Even the secular forces are only concerned about their own issues and they do not join a cross-sectional front. For example, how many Dalits are there to talk about Muslim issues? How many Muslims are raising the issues of Adivasis? There is a need to give up this secular sectarianism.

*What do you have to say about the weakening of the Bahujan Samajwadi Party?*

The BSP is now working with bottom to top approach, from Bahujan to Sarvajan, while the BJP's strategy is top-down from upper caste to Dalits. In other words, the BSP started with Dalits and ended up with upper caste, while the BJP journeyed from upper castes and reached Dalits. Unlike the 1980s and the 1990s, the BSP does not have any unique idea today. The biggest challenge before the BSP is the RSS and the BJP's ability to make an inroad among Dalits. For example, the recent trend shows that a large section of urban Dalits voted for Modi.

*Apart from Modi, Akhilesh Yadav's government in UP has also come in for a sharp criticism for its failure to check the incidents of communal violence. Is it not a paradox that the SP government in UP, which was given a huge mandate, particularly from Muslims and Backward Castes in assembly election to fulfill secular agendas, has failed to arrest the incidents of anti-Muslim violence in UP, particularly in areas of Kosi Kalaan, Bareilly, Faizabad, Meerut, Sabaranpur, Shabhal, Shamli, Masuri, Ghaziabad etc.?*

The secular parties, like the SP, are in-

volved in Secular sectarianism. While the BJP eyed majority Hindu votes, the SP also saw communal tension in UP as electorally beneficial because Muslims have been its traditional voters. Akhilesh government wanted to keep the conflict small so that a sense of insecurity would naturally draw Muslims to the SP but things went out of control and the fire of communal tensions engulfed large parts of western UP.

*The opposition Congress is today attacking Modi Government for inciting as many as 600 incidents of communal riots. Don't you think that the oldest party of India was also not serious about the prevention of communal violence when it was in power at the Centre for 10 years? Do you support the view that had it been so, Prevention of Communal and Targeted Violence would have been long passed?*

The Congress was interested to pass Anti-Communal Violence Bill but it is also a fact that it cannot go for hard secularism as it fears that it will be seen as anti-Hindu with a Christian party president in Sonia Gandhi at the top. That is why it does not want to appear to be pro-Muslim and it fears that the talk of Muslim welfare will consolidate Hindu majority votes against it. This is the dilemma of secular parties. How much do they want to pursue inclusive policies for Muslims without polarizing politics?

*As you said that Muslims are new subaltern group of India? What evidence do you have to support this claim?*

As a new subaltern of the country, Muslims are marginalized in all three spheres, social, economic and political. They remain socially ostracized, economically deprived and politically unrepresented. Even the other marginalized social groups like Dalits and OBCs are not deprived in all three spheres. Muslims are becoming easy target of even those who are placed at the bottom of Hindu caste hierarchy. I, therefore, support 10 to 12 per cent of Muslim reservation. As far as the opposition that Muslims cannot be given reservation, I do not find any substantive point in this. On the basis of concrete social backwardness, they deserve affirmative actions. I also do not quite agree with the argument of Pasmanda Movement that Ashraf Muslims cannot be included into ambit of reservation. To address their concerns, there can be creamy layer cap, like OBCs, among Muslims. Besides, there is a need to create a middle class among Muslims.

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*Mishab Irikur and Abhay Kumar are pursuing PhD at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.*